

Roehampton University, Fall 2012

London, England

Creative Writing Assessment

Father has died and my heels are burning. I can hear the skin crisping off in clean flakes as the ground rises up to keep me running and breathing. Today is day four. I am aware that mother is worried about me as I turn a corner and let the Jersey heat sting my face. I wonder what will happen once the sun discovers that all of my sweat has gone and I have no more to surrender.

As I blur past Seventh Avenue, I think of how my father used to read me his poetry when I was a child. I remember hearing him wake to write, propped in his bed at 3AM. The scrawl of a ballpoint pen. The click of a lamp that rested upon a nightstand. This morning, when they searched the house, they found that not a single poem was written for me.

I have been running for thirteen minutes. My chest squeezes with deep resistance, but I can't slow. *Thwap. Thwap. Thwap. Thwap.* Each step is one farther away from the man who was once alive. I can't begin to imagine what the rest of life will be like without him.

On the second day after father died, mother sniffed as I shuffled past her into her therapist's office. The therapist grinned at me through prescription half-moon spectacles. He meagrely told a joke, and so I laughed. I sat and smiled politely as Dr K shifted his weight from one slouching cheek to the other. His face wrinkled as he poised his quill above his parchment.

“I’m so sorry for your loss,” Dr K told me, and I inclined my head. In that moment, I wished that I had bought a jar the day that father died. That way, I could have captured all of the *I’m sorrys* and put them in the jar next to my side of the bed on the nights I feign sleep. When the darkness came I would be able to lift the lid and keep the sadness from overwhelming me. Smiling at the thought of all of my lightning bug *sorrys* flittering about my room, I muttered several lies to alleviate the silence.

“We really weren’t that close,” I said airily, tonguing the inside of my cheek. I consistently bite the lower right side of my lip by accident. More scarred tissue.

“Hmm, is that so? It says here that your father was only fifty-six. He was very young to pass. How do you feel about that?” he asked me, on his face an exaggerated frown.

“Yes, it is very young. I feel quite sad for him. But I honestly am doing well, my mother is the one who raised me,” I responded, pretending to examine my manicure, and hoping I came off as apathetic. He asked a few more questions and I muttered learned responses before I was shuffled once again out of the office and into the back of mother’s car before the sunlight could taste me.

That was two days ago and now, I know where I’m running.

75 percent of the human body is made up of water; the other 25 is the waste of space that allows me to function between the last time I jumped in the ocean and the next time I will be able to. This love affair started the first time I set foot on a beach. As a six-year-old, I counted sand dollars, examined dead shoe crabs. I let nature love me back. Most of the time, it’s hard to let anything love me back.

When I finally see the shoreline, I let my feet slow and take my breaths in heaves. I walk with my hands on my knees to an intersection and pace myself. Making my way up the boardwalk, I stare at the ocean as I move quickly toward the sand. If father were here, we would stop, listen, and wait patiently for a Gopher tortoise to cross the footpath, or search for the tiny lizards that live in the dunes. But today, on the fourth day since father has died, I am alone.

I walk forward and sit at the edge of the water. I dig my toes deep into the sand, letting the water lap onto my feet and soak into my shorts. I hang my head low and listen to the piercing call of a seagull. I let him cry for me.

I think of the things I should have done for father. I plot a list of all the arguments I will never be able to resolve with him. I go into denial for another moment – I need to call his cell phone, I know that he'll answer – then I am angry for all the ways I let him down. I relive several conversations yelled in moments of teenage angst. I feel my face burning with regret before I start bargaining with God.

*I promise that I will never cheat on another one of Mr Cohnon's tests if you bring him back to me. And I'll quit smoking.*

I add my own apology, for father, to the jar of lightning bugs.

I take another long, deep breath, and muster the energy to stand. I watch the ocean as I bury my hands in my shallow lint-filled pockets. Beachgoers are a mile and a half down the stretch; I can see the waves churning out surfboards from here.

I turn back to the ocean and watch her in silence. Swishing quietly through the shallow surf, I feel a doleful cry brush past my lips and I press my hand against my abdomen, willing the hurt to stay inside. My restraint weakens as my steps become

uneven, drunken. Like a wounded animal, I fall, and feel an explosion of sorrow spill onto the sand. Crashing onto my bottom and rocking back and forth, I bring my knees to my forehead and convulse. For the first time since father has died, I let one cry crash over another.

When I feel like I can control myself, I wipe my eyes and hug my arms around my body. I think that the direction I go in is less important than the fact that I think I'm ready to take a step. Before I get up, I remember the poetry and bite my lip. That's what sent me like a bat out of hell from my house in the first place. I feel hot tears welling again, and swallow against the lump in my throat. I wonder what I would write for father if he could read it. I take a deep breath and brush my fingers in the sand, lightly tracing the words.

*This small effort is for the kind and gentle side*

*that we all need to work on.*

*I wish I had known to do more that April*

*I thought you were in still in reach.*

*I know now that the next few years will be diminished*

*because I failed in ways I never knew to try.*

*You did it better than most, but had to leave early.*

*And for that, I am so sorry.*